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THE

L I F E

OF

ROBERT FERGUSSON,

WITH A

CRITIQUE ON HIS WORKS.

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BY DAVID IRVING.

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Τίς ποτε σὺ σύριγγι μελίσσεται, ὦ τριπύθατι;

Τίς δ' ἐπὶ σοῖς καλὰ μοῖς θάσσει τόμα; τίς θεασὼν ἔτας.

MOSCHUS.



GLASGOW,

Printed by Chapman and Lang.

—♦♦—  
1799.



TO  
ROBERT ANDERSON, M.D.

THE FOLLOWING  
LIFE OF FERGUSSON

IS GRATEFULLY INSCRIBED,

BY  
HIS HUMBLE SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

BY HENRY B. SWANwick

IN TWO VOLUMES

BY

THE AUTHOR

THE AUTHOR



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THE  
LIFE OF FERGUSSON.

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IT is to be wished, that the life of this unfortunate Poet had been delineated by some one possessed of more ample information, than the present writer, with all his endeavours, has been able to procure. An impartial account of his short and headlong career, might be rendered not only highly interesting, but even of considerable advantage to society. By presenting to the eyes of inexperience, a faithful picture of the evils by which imprudent conduct is ever accompanied, it might possibly excite in young and susceptible minds, a steady aversion to those practices which tended to involve Fergusson in the deepest calamities.

As little curiosity has hitherto been discovered

with regard to his history, the collecting of materials for the following sketch, has been attended with some difficulty. In the performance of this task, I have been chiefly aided by the friendly exertions of Dr. Robert Anderson, a gentleman, not more distinguished for his ingenuity and learning, than for the amiable benevolence of his mind\*

Robert Fergusson was born at Edinburgh on the 5th of September, 1750. His father, William Fergusson, who, in his youth had discovered some propensity to the study of poetry, maintained a respectable character in the humble station in which Providence had placed him. He served an apprenticeship to a merchant in Aberdeen, and about the year 1746, came to Edinburgh, in order to find employment. Having been engaged as a clerk by several different masters, and these too, of various occupations, he at length procured a situation in the office of the British Linen Company, in which he continued till his death.

\* Dr. Anderson, who has already deserved so well from the republic of letters, is now preparing for the press, an improved edition of his *Lives of the British Poets* detached from the complete collection of their respective works.

Young Fergusson was of a constitution so extremely delicate, that he could not go to school till he had reached his sixth year. He was then sent to a Mr. Philps, who, at that time resided in Black-friars Wynd; and under his tuition he was qualified for the High School, in the space of little more than six months. While he continued here, the infirm state of his health prevented him from giving the proper attendance: yet by means of his superior capacity, aided by a generous spirit of emulation, he excelled most of his companions. It was during those intervals in which the delicacy of his frame confined him at home, that he first discovered a relish for reading. He gratified his taste in this respect, by the perusal of such books as chance threw in his way; and the interrogations which he put concerning any subject that attracted his notice, often puzzled those who were much older than himself. The Proverbs of Solomon were his earliest favourite.

Having continued four years at the Grammar School of Edinburgh, he was next removed to that of Dundee, where he remained two years longer,

In both of these seminaries he made a surprizing progress.

He was originally intended for the church, and his friends were so fortunate as to procure him a bursary in the University of St. Andrews, where he entered as a student at the age of thirteen. Here, he soon became distinguished as a youth of a very superior genius, and rendered himself conspicuous among his brother-collegians as "a fellow of infinite jest, and most excellent fancy." He is said to have recommended himself to the favour of Dr. Wilkie, who was then Professor of Natural Philosophy, in that University. Some have even reported that Wilkie frequently employed him to read his academical prelections, when sickness, or other casual circumstances prevented him from performing that duty himself. But this report must be better authenticated, before it can gain any credit. A boy of sixteen or seventeen years of age, mounting the professorial rostrum, would afford a somewhat curious exhibition.

He was never very remarkable for his application to study: yet he went through the various exercises



which the rules of his college prescribed, with a sufficient degree of applause. There is reason to believe that his natural propensity for mirth and gaiety often caused him to relax in his exertions. He bore a principal part in a thousand youthful frolics; many of which are still remembered at St. Andrews.

During his residence at the University, he began to cultivate those poetical talents which nature had implanted in his soul; and besides composing various little pieces, he there formed the plan of a tragedy, entitled "Sir William Wallace," and even finished the two first acts. For some reason or other, he did not persevere in his design: nor is there a single verse of this juvenile production extant. Upon one of the blank leaves of a book which was formerly in his possession, there are indeed two or three speeches in his own hand-writing, but these seem rather to be intended as part of some other dramatic attempt\*. The following are all the lines that can be distinctly read.

\* The book is intitled, "A Defence of the Church Government, Faith, Worship, and Spirit of the Presbyterians. By John Anderfon, M. A."—Mr. Anderson was the grandfather of the late Professor Anderson of Glasgow. Boyse wrote an c-



Therefore 'tis meet that Sisera be crown'd  
With all the honour worthy of his service,  
And that this day for mirth be set apart  
To celebrate the deeds, and valiant acts  
Display'd by him in war.

Conquest alone, my liege, rewards our toil:  
But since it is your sovereign inclination  
This day to grace us with a pompous triumph,  
As swift as thought my deeds shall fly to serve  
In all your after battles.

Upon the expiration of his bursary, he returned home, after having resided at St. Andrews for the space of four years. He now abandoned all thoughts of prosecuting the study of Divinity. The perpetual restraint which the sacred profession necessarily imposes, was not at all agreeable to one of his turn of mind; and without submitting to this restraint, he knew he should expose himself to the anathemas of those who, on every occasion, stand prepared to wrest the vindictive thunder from the hands of Omnipotence.

leg upon his death. Upon another blank leaf of the same book, Fergusson has designed himself "Student of Divinity," from which it would appear that he had been entered a Civis of the Theological class.

As he had been deprived of his father two years before, his prospects were now very gloomy. His mother was not in a situation to maintain him at home; and he could never fix upon any determinate plan of future employment. His liberal education might have fitted him for the duties of a tutor: but it may readily be supposed, that his ingenuous mind revolted at the idea of perpetual dependence.

He had an uncle living near Aberdeen, a Mr. John Forbes, who was in pretty affluent circumstances. To him he paid a visit, in hopes of procuring some suitable employment through his influence. Mr. Forbes at first treated him with civility; but instead of exerting himself to promote his interest, suffered him to remain six months in his house, and then dismissed him in a manner which reflects very little honour on his memory. His clothes were beginning to assume a thread-bare appearance; and on this account he was deemed an improper guest for his uncle's house. Filled with indignation at the unworthy treatment he had received, he retired to a little solitary inn, which stood at a small distance; and having procured pen, ink and paper, wrote him a letter full of the most manly sentiments. Af-

ter his departure, Mr. Forbes began to relent, and dispatched a messenger to him with a few shillings to bear his expences upon the road. This paltry present, the lowness of his funds compelled him to accept. He set out for Edinburgh on foot, and at length reached his mother's house. The fatigues of the journey, added to the depression of his mind, had such an effect upon his delicate constitution, that for two or three days he was confined to bed. When he began to recover a little more strength, he endeavoured to console his grief by composing his poem on *The Decay of Friendship*, and that *Against Repining at Fortune*.

Shortly after the above occurrence, he was employed in the Commissary Clerk's Office; but being unable to submit to the tyranny of the deputy, he soon relinquished his situation. Having remained for a considerable while without any occupation, he was next received into the Sheriff Clerk's Office, in which he continued during the rest of his lifetime.

The report of his having attempted the study of the Law, seems to be devoid of all foundation. There is surely a very material distinction betwixt studying

Law, and transcribing Law-papers, at so much a page. Indeed this science could never have possessed any charms for a young man of his lively fancy. The experience of former ages had shewn, that Poetry and Law are things too heterogeneous in their nature, ever to unite in the same individual. 'Tis a somewhat curious fact, that several very eminent poets were originally destined for the bar, and after having for a short time submitted to the preparatory study, at length abandoned it in disgust. Among this number we find the illustrious names of Tasso, Ariosto, Petrarch, Corneille and Rowe.

By proper application to business he might now have gained a comfortable subsistence: but unfortunately he considered the duties of his office as only of inferior moment. He employed himself principally either in the cultivation of his poetical talents, or in such amusements as lay within his reach.

Long before he had completed his twentieth year, many of his little pieces made their appearance in Ruddiman's Weekly Magazine, a well conducted miscellany, which was enriched with the vernal blossoms of Anderson, Græme and Bruce.—To trace



him through the whole of his poetical career, would be productive of very little entertainment. His poems are too numerous to admit of a particular enumeration. Most of the subjects on which he wrote were suggested by the occurrences of the day.

Upon Sir John Fielding's attempt to prohibit the representation of the *Beggar's Opera*, he addressed a satirical epistle to that active magistrate. In this instance he seems to have acted from mistaken motives; for the conduct of Sir John in endeavouring to prevent the pernicious consequences which were frequently known to result from the representation of this drama, must certainly be regarded as highly laudable. Nor is his panegyric upon Gay authorised by the uniform tenor of that poet's writings. Gay, in some of his poems, is not only immoral, but even obscene.

In order to ridicule the sesquipedalian style of Dr. Johnson, he presented him with *Food for a new Edition of his Dictionary*. This poem contains something risible enough: but it was not by the attack of such an adversary that the reputation of that mighty genius could be in the least injured:



—telumque imbelle sine ictu

Conjecit\*.

In a poem entitled *An Expedition to Fife*, he happened to cast some reflections on that district, branding it as “The most unhallowed ’midst the Scotian plains.” This aspersion drew a formal challenge from a Fifeshire gentleman, who, as it would appear, was feelingly alive to the honour of his country. But instead of accepting his antagonist’s invitation, he treated it with that contempt which it so justly merited.

The public immediately began to discover the real value of his productions; and from the time of their first appearance in the *Weekly Magazine*, he was regarded as a poet of very superior talents. His company was now courted by people of almost every description; for it is no uncommon opinion, that the acquaintance of men of genius and learning atones for the want of these qualities in ourselves. To the circles where gaiety and humour prevailed, his conversation recommended itself by every possible charm; and where a more grave deportment was necessary, he could accommodate his manners to

\* Virgil, *Æneid.* 2.

those of the company. But from the caresses of an hour, he could derive no solid advantage. Notwithstanding the admiration which his genius excited, he was never so fortunate as to find any one to patronize his rising merit. His present situation was far from being agreeable: he had been left poor by his father, and the mode of conduct which he pursued was but ill calculated for placing him in affluence.

The miseries of a young man of genius and sensibility, who thus found himself upon the vast theatre of human life, without friends to shelter him from the storms of adversity, and with scarce one ray of hope to brighten his future prospects, may be more easily conceived than described.

Hard is the scholar's lot, condemn'd to sail  
Unpatroniz'd o'er life's tempestuous wave;  
Clouds blind his sight; nor blows a friendly gale,  
To waft him to one port, except the grave.

PENROSE.

In 1773. he published a collection of his poems, consisting of such pieces as had appeared in Ruddiman's Magazine, with the addition of some others. During the course of the same year, a compliment-

ary epistle with the signature of J. S. was addressed to him in the above mentioned Magazine. To this he made a suitable reply through the same channel.

In 1774 his friends prevailed upon him to compose a pastoral poem to the memory of Mr. Cunningham, a writer who will continue to be admired as long as there remains the least relish for elegant simplicity. It was published for the benefit of the unfortunate author, who was then verging towards that state of insanity, in which he at length closed his miserable existence.\* As he was then incapable of superintending the press, some of his friends kindly undertook that office. This poem was the last of his productions.

The latter part of his life was spent in almost perpetual dissipation. The pleasures of the social bowl were a temptation which he was unable to resist: and indeed, the unpleasant situation of his affairs might induce him to grasp at every object that promised a temporary alleviation of his cares. He, in a great measure, neglected his profession; and associated with men of very dissolute

\* Anderson's Life of Cunningham.

manners, several of whom are mentioned in his *Last Will*, and the *Codicil* to it. From an epigram to be found among his posthumous pieces, it appears that at one time or other he had conceived the design of abandoning the scene of his follies, and trying his fortune at sea. He formed many other projects of a like nature, but could never acquire a sufficient degree of resolution to carry any of them into effect.

There is one anecdote concerning him which must not be passed over in silence; an anecdote which every reader must delight to hear, and every biographer feel a secret pleasure in relating. He had contracted an intimacy with a gentleman of the name of Burnet, who afterwards went to the East Indies. Mr. Burnet was so captivated with his amiable manners, that when he had properly arranged his own affairs, he resolved to provide for his unfortunate friend. In pursuance of this laudable design, he sent him a very cordial invitation to come over to India, and at the same time remitted a draught of a hundred pounds, for defraying the expences he might incur in preparing for the voyage. But, alas! this bounty came too late; for he had then paid the



debt of nature. Yet although Mr. Burnet's benevolent intentions were thus defeated by the stroke of death, it may still afford him a very pleasing reflection, that, of all those who were acquainted with the merits of Fergusson, he was the only person that stretched forth his hand in order to rescue him from the uncomfortable situation in which he spent the greater part of his life. Such an action reflects honour on humanity.

Though he had lived for several years in the midst of dissipation, yet the force of vicious habits was not entirely able to efface those serious impressions which had been the effects of a religious education. The following anecdote is related by Mr. Campbell. "It happened in the autumn of 1774, while on a visit to a friend in the neighbourhood of Haddington, that one day as young Fergusson was sauntering near the church-yard of that town, that a person of a sudden joined him, who accosted him in a polite and familiar manner. The solemnity of the scene naturally suggested a conversation, rather of a moral cast, which by degrees became abstract and gloomy. This stranger turned out to be a pious Divine, of the sect called Seceders from the church of Scotland;



his name was Brown, author of several works in Divinity, well known among the true believers of that sect. Mortality and a judgment to come were the topics our Divine chose to expatiate on, and bring home to Fergusson. These topics seemed to sink deep in the mind of our poet, and they parted; the one convinced that he had found a lost sheep, the other that he had been led too far astray, to find favour in the sight of the chief Shepherd of Israel. He returned to his mother's house in all the agonies of religious horror; and soon sunk into a state of complete despondency\*."

This account of the matter is not altogether accurate.† The above incident did not occur in 1774; but almost two years before that period. 'Tis true, his conversation with the Rev. Mr. Brown had then

\* Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland.

† The writer of these pages having had occasion to experience Mr. Campbell's politeness, is extremely sorry in finding himself under the necessity of informing the public, that several other anecdotes of Fergusson, contained in his Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland, are far from being accurately stated. This circumstance is easily accounted for. Mr. Campbell received his information from our poet's sister; but instead of committing it to writing upon the spot, he trusted solely to memory.

made some impression upon his mind; but that impression lasted for a very short while. Nor did his insanity proceed from any such cause as is here assigned. Those who are acquainted with the manner in which he spent the latter part of his life, will scarcely be at a loss in accounting for those misfortunes which at length befel him. He sunk into a state of religious despondency; but previous to that event his body was emaciated by disease, and his mind totally unhinged. His relations began to observe in his behaviour something of an infantine cast: he talked in an incoherent manner, and often manifested an entire vacillation of thought. Persons in his condition must generally have some leading object to engross their attention, and religion happened to present itself to him. His favourite studies were now neglected: he laid every other book aside, and made the Bible his constant companion.

Such of his manuscripts as were in his own possession, he committed indiscriminately to the flames, and was heard to declare, that he felt some consolation in never having written any thing against religion.

From the following anecdote the reader will re-

ceive a juster idea of his situation, than the most diffuse description can convey. He was one day met below the North Bridge by a gentleman with whom he had formerly been very intimately connected; and as he seemed to pass on quite regardless of every surrounding object, his friend accosted him, and demanded of him whither he was going. He replied he had just discovered one of the reprobates who crucified our Saviour, and that in order to have him disposed of according to law, he was making all possible haste to lodge the information with Lord Kames,—who by the way, if a judgment may be formed from his writings, would not have been very warm in the cause.

Having experienced a kind of temporary relief from his dreadful malady, he again began to visit his friends; but had one night the misfortune to fall from a stair-case, and receive a violent contusion on the head. When carried home, he could give no account of the accident, and seemed altogether insensible of his own situation. His brain was evidently disordered; and he at last became so outrageous, that it was not without some difficulty that two or three men could restrain his violence..

As his afflicted mother was not in a condition to command the proper attendance in her own house, she was under the necessity of having him removed to the public asylum. A few of his most intimate friends having watched a favourable opportunity, found means to get him conveyed thither, by decoying him into a chair, as if he had been about to pay some evening visit. When they reached the place of their destination, all was wrapt in profound silence. The poor youth entered the dismal mansion. He cast his eyes wildly round, and began to perceive his real situation. The discovery awaked every feeling of his soul. He raised a hideous shout, which being instantly returned by the wretched inhabitants of every cell, echoed along the vaulted roofs. His companions stood aghast at the dreadful scene: the impression which it made upon their minds was too deep for time ever to efface.

Having consigned him to the care of the keeper, they withdrew.—When he was afterwards visited by his mother and elder sister, his phrensy had almost entirely subsided. He had at first imagined himself a king or some other great personage; and adorned his head with a crown of straw, which he



plaited very neatly with his own hands. The delusion, however, was now vanished: upon their entering, they found him lying in his cell, to appearance calm and collected. He told them he was sensible of their kindness, and hoped he should soon be in a condition to receive their visits. He also recalled to their memory the presentiment which he had so often expressed, of his being at length overwhelmed by this most dreadful of all calamities; but endeavoured to comfort them with assurances of his being humanely treated in the asylum. He entreated his sister to bring her work, and frequently sit by him, in order to dispel the gloom that overcast his mind. To all this they could only answer with their sighs and tears.—When the keeper entered, and informed them that it was time to depart, he with great earnestness conjured them to remain with him a little longer: but with this request it was not in their power to comply.

From his behaviour during this interview, his mother was led to entertain hopes of his speedy recovery. A remittance from her son Henry having now rendered her more easy in her circumstances, she determined to remove him to her own house, and



immediately began to arrange matters for his reception. But, alas, these hopes were only delusive! for within the space of a few days, a messenger brought her the melancholy tidings that her beloved son had breathed his last. The violent exertions of his mind had gradually ruined the animal system; and in the end, his strength was so much exhausted, that he expired without a groan. He died on the sixteenth of October, 1774, after having continued about two months in the public asylum. His remains were decently interred in the Cannongate church-yard; and for a considerable time, there was no stone to mark the place of his dust. Posterity will find some difficulty in persuading themselves, that after the inhabitants of a wealthy metropolis had neglected to erect a monument to his memory, this honour at last devolved upon a private individual, whose pecuniary resources were, at that time, scarcely adequate to his generous intentions. The behaviour of Robert Burns upon this occasion will ever be remembered to his honour.—But he now stands in need of the same tribute of affection, which he once paid to the memory of his unfortunate predecessor.

Upon one side of the stone, he caused the following epitaph to be engraven:

No sculptur'd marble here, nor pompous lay!

No storied urn, nor animated bust!

This simple stone directs pale Scotia's way,

To pour her sorrows o'er her poet's dust.

The other side contains this inscription:

By special grant of the Managers

To ROBERT BURNS, who erected this stone,

This burial place is ever to remain sacred to the memory of

ROBERT FERGUSSON.

With regard to his learning, it cannot reasonably be supposed to have been very extensive. It appears from his writings, that he had a pretty general acquaintance with the English poets; of whom his greatest favourites were Shakespeare, Thomson, Pope and Cunningham. His acquaintance with ancient Scottish poetry seems to have been rather limited: according to Mr. Pinkerton, it did not extend beyond Ramsay's *Ever Green*.\* His manner of life was unfavourable to the acquisition of general knowledge. He was wont to express the most sovereign contempt for the speculations of Logic, Metaphysics and Mathematics; a strong presumption

\* *Ancient Scottish Poems*, Vol. i.

that he was but slightly acquainted with them. Poets have seldom any relish for these abstract sciences: the art which they cultivate delights in giving

To airy nothings

A local habitation and a name\*;

not in contemplating objects of pure intellection. Gray, with all his learning, was almost entirely ignorant of the Mathematical sciences.

As to his person, he was about the middle stature, and of a slender make. His countenance, which in other respects had a tendency towards effeminacy, was rendered highly animated by the expression of his large black eyes. His manner was genteel, and free from every species of affectation.

It is agreed by all those who knew him, that his character was of the most amiable kind. To the most sprightly fancy, he joined the more endearing qualities of modesty, a gentle temper, and the greatest goodness of heart. Such was the benevolence of his disposition, that he would often bestow his last farthing upon those who solicited his charity. His surviving relations retain a pleasing

\* Shakespeare.

remembrance of his dutiful behaviour towards his parents: and the tender regard with which his memory is still cherished by his numerous acquaintance, fully demonstrates his value as a friend. Till his dissipated manner of life had in a great measure eradicated all sense of delicacy or propriety, he always shewed himself possessed of a manly spirit of independence. It ought to be recorded to his honour, that he never disgraced his Muse with the servile strain of panegyric: he flattered no illiterate peer, nor sacrificed his sincerity, in order to advance his interest.

It must not, however, be concealed, that his virtues were tainted with glaring imperfections. He was an utter stranger to temperance and sobriety, without which, no character can be proposed as an example worthy of imitation.—Yet over his frailties let humanity drop a tear: let his virtues alone be remembered, and his vices permitted to sink into oblivion.

He had two sisters, Barbara, and Margaret, both of whom are still living in Edinburgh. The former is married to Mr. David Inverarity, cabinet-maker,



Canal-street, the latter to Mr. Duval, a purser in the navy. His elder brother Henry, who has already been mentioned, was a young man of considerable learning and ingenuity. He had been bound an apprentice to a merchant in Edinburgh; but being led astray by vicious company, was under the necessity of entering on board a man of war. As his friends have had no accounts of him for a great number of years, they have long ago abandoned all hopes of ever seeing him again. A letter of his to his brother, dated Tartar, in Rapahannock river, Virginia, 8th of October, 1773, has already been laid before the public, and may with sufficient propriety be inserted here.

“ Since the beginning of last month, when I was favoured with yours of the 1st February, 1773, I have been in most rivers in this province and Maryland. Our business was to look out after smugglers; and had we been as active in that duty as others on the American station, I might have been enabled to make my appearance in a brilliant manner: but, alas! only a sloop of 80 tons from the West Indies, loaden with coffee and sugar, fell to our lot. I had sixteen dollars for my share, three of

which I gave towards buying a tender, and every fore-mast man paid one. The tender is now manned, armed, and cruizing Chesapeak bay, and I am convinced cannot fail of taking prizes, if the officers appointed for that duty are attentive.

We had the most severe winter at Halifax ever experienced in that country. The harbour, though three miles across, was frozen over for three weeks. The ship's company walked aboard and ashore, nay, all our provisions were got aboard on the ice (which in many places was thirty-six feet in thickness) notwithstanding the strong north-west winds which blow most of the winter.

When we arrived at Boston, we were ordered to this country, which has been as hot this summer as the former was cold in winter. Such a change of climate could not fail to create sickness in the ship's company: but, thank God, only three have died, one a natural death, and the other two drowned.

I had a very severe fit of sickness at our first coming here; but being so much given to sweating, it proved an effectual cure, although I am very weak

through that means. I never lived so badly, as aboard here in point of provisions, every species being the worst of their kinds, and neither butter or flour to be had.

I desire you will write by the packet on receipt; for if you lay hold of any other opportunity, your letter will be too late; the ship being positively ordered home early next spring, to my great satisfaction, being quite tired of a life that my past follies drove me to, and to which I have served too long an apprenticeship. If every thing does not succeed to my satisfaction, on my arrival in England, I am fully bent to return and settle in this country; having had the fairest offers imaginable, could my discharge have been procured. In Virginia and Maryland, in particular, I could do best by acting in a double capacity, by learning (teaching) the small sword, and the exercise of the small arms, there being no regular forces in either provinces, and the officers of the militia being quite ignorant themselves of that part of their duty.

I desire it as a favour, you would often examine your poetical pieces before you commit them to the

press. This advice I hope you will the more readily take, as most young authors are apt to be more criticised than those who have had a little experience. Pope himself, was one of the most careful in this respect, and none yet has ever surpassed him. When I arrive in England, I shall give you the necessary directions how to send your works, and make no doubt of selling them to advantage, when the ship is paid off.

I am sorry to hear of J. Wright's death: he was a worthy young lad, and one I had a true regard for.

Thick Peter, I hope by this time is recovered. I should be glad to hear of Robertson and Addison's success: The latter, if in Edinburgh, I desire to be kindly remembered to. I should also be happy to hear how Sandie Young, and John Coomans do, having often experienced their kindness, and been happy in their company.

In our passage from Boston to Hampton, we had a very narrow escape with our lives, being surrounded with one of the largest water-spouts ever seen,



which blackened the sky for some leagues, and, had we not barely weathered it, would have sunk the ship and every soul aboard.

Remember me in the strongest manner to my mother, Peggy, Rarities, Father Parker, &c. &c. If you want either to succeed, or gain esteem, be very careful of what company you keep. This advice I hope you will take, as it comes from one who has lost himself merely through inattention in that respect. Believe me, it is impossible to write you as I would chuse, being environed with twenty thousand noisy plagues, not to mention execrations so horrid, that would make the greatest blackguard in Edinburgh's hair stand erect. I hope you'll make it your particular care, to study such branches of education as may prove most conducive to your future happiness, and appear at least once every Sunday in church (I mean the church of Scotland) for how can you spend your time better? I was, like many, fond of the church of England's forms, &c. But having been in many Romish churches since, find these forms are merely the \* \* \* of laziness, and differ but very little from one another: this you

can be convinced of, in perusing a Romish mass-book in English."

The following is also an extract of another of his letters to his brother. The date is torn away, but it appears to have been written from Edinburgh.

"I read with attention the burial-letter you versified, and your poetical letter to the cripple laureat. The former I approve of, but cannot recommend the latter in point of rhyme. You'll please notice, that the three first and fifth, and the second and fourth lines in compositions of this kind, (such as Habbie Simpson, &c.) chime with one another..

At first when I came here, I imagined when one spoke of entering at a precise time, that he was serious; but now I see the contrary, and that their promises are only to tantalize me: for ever since the year 1601, that the court sat here, the Edinburghers have retained some of its fashions, and among the rest, flattery to a high degree.

I have only eight scholars, but expect more\*. God

\* He occasionally taught the use of the sword; and likewise published a treatise on that subject.—For the above let-

grant they may not prove like one Campbell, who bilk'd me out of 2l. 2s. for instructions I gave him upon one foot. Although he has done me much evil, yet I shall not pray for him in the manner Paul, or some other apostle, did for Alexander the copper-smith."

ter, as well as for several particulars contained in this narrative, I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. James Inverarity, one of Fergusson's nephews.



CRITIQUE  
ON  
FERGUSSON'S WORKS.

THE reputation of Fergusson as a Poet rests almost solely upon the merit of his Scottish compositions. To such of his pieces as are written in English, very little praise is due: in some of them, indeed, it is easy to discover marks of genius; but the greater part appear to have been the earliest productions of his Muse, and are neither distinguished by originality of thought, nor superior harmony of versification.

His eclogues, entitled *Morning*, *Noon*, and *Night*, exhibit the general characteristics of the modern pastoral; the numbers are sufficiently smooth, but the sentiments trite and common. The reader meets with nothing that captivates his fancy, or interests his feelings. Many passages are extremely puerile. It would be difficult to produce from the



writings of any poet whatsoever, a more tautological verse than the following:

Gentle in spring-time, and in summer mild.

*The Complaint* is likewise a very meagre production: it is scarcely superior to the strains of a free-mason song.

There is something in the nature of pastoral poetry, which seems to preclude all hopes of succeeding in that species of composition: The life of a shepherd admits of little variety: in the morning he leads his flocks to their wonted pasture, and when the shades of evening begin to descend, again collects them in some spot where they may spend the night in safety. Few passions agitate his breast: he is no stranger to love; but his method of gaining the affections of his mistress, is such as every other shepherd adopts. The objects of nature with which he is conversant, have so often been displayed with all the glowing colours of poetry, that it would be no easy task to produce any thing new upon this subject.—Hence, the very inconsiderable number of pastoral poets, whose works are held in general estimation.

Of *The Expedition to Fife*, *The Epistle to a Friend*, and other poems of the same class, nothing very favourable can be said. The application of blank

verse to trivial or ludicrous subjects, has seldom been found to succeed: *The Splendid Shilling* is almost the only poem of that description, which can afford pleasure in the reading. Besides the advantage of its being altogether original in the design, it possesses a kind of quaint dignity peculiar to itself.

Philips was the model which he proposed to imitate: but his versification bears a stronger resemblance to that of Trapp, or Roscommon\*. The cadence of his verses is commonly the same as that of the rhyming couplet. The following passage will illustrate this observation.

From noisy bustle, from contention free,  
Far from the busy town I careless loll,  
Not like swain Tityrus, or the bards of old,  
Under a beechen, venerable shade;  
But on a furzy heath, where blooming broom  
And thorny whins the spacious plains adorn:  
Here health sits smiling on my youthful brow;  
For ere the sun, &c.

Nothing can be more fatiguing to the ear than such verses as these: the structure of every first line naturally induces us to expect a correspondent rhyme at the close of the next; but as this expectation is always disappointed, we are filled with langour and disgust.

\* See Trapp's "Virgil," and Roscommon's "Translation of Horace's Art of Poetry."

His *Stanzas written at the Hermitage of Braid*, have been pronounced "inferior in beautiful description, and elegant versification to none in any language." Whether this praise is to be received without certain limitations, will admit of some dispute. They are not devoid of poetical merit; but will scarcely be found entitled to unqualified commendation.

The poem *Against Repining at Fortune*, contains one passage worthy of being quoted:

Can he, who with the tide of fortune sails,  
 More pleasure from the sweets of nature share?  
 Do zephyrs waft him more ambrosial gales,  
 Or do his groves a gayer liv'ry wear?

To me the heav'ns unveil as pure a sky;  
 To me the flow'rs as rich a bloom disclose;  
 The morning beams as radiant to my eye,  
 And darkness guides me to as sweet repose.

The latter of these stanzas possesses a considerable degree of suavity\*.

\* Among the ancients, Theocritus, Moschus, Bion, and Virgil, are the only pastoral poets whose works have obtained any considerable degree of celebrity.—The productions of Nemesian and Calpurnius, seem to merit more attention than has hitherto been bestowed upon them. Though much inferior to Virgil, they may both be read with pleasure.—The following passage is eminently beautiful.

Te sine, vac misero! mihi lilia nigra videntur,

His *Last Will* with the *Codicil* to it, may be ranked among the best of his English poems. Though far from being a correct production, it is sprightly throughout. Like Butler and Swift, he has frequently introduced double rhymes, which commonly please from their being unexpected.

The *Epilogue* spoken by *Mr. Wilson* is still superior to his *Last Will*; it is not only humorous and lively, but even possesses a considerable degree of vigour. Perhaps it is little inferior to many of the prologues and epilogues of Dryden.

In Mason's "Collection for the use of Schools," there is a little *Night-piece* of his, which likewise seems a tolerably happy effort.

Now murky shades surround the pole:  
 Darkness lords without controul;  
 To the notes of buzzing owl,  
 Lions roar, and tygers howl,  
 Fright'ning from their azure shrine,  
 Stars that wont in orbs to shine:  
 Now the sailor's storm-tost bark  
 Knows no blest celestial mark,

Pallentesque rosae, nec dulce rubens hyacinthus,  
 Nullos nec myrtus, nec laurus spirat odores.  
 At tu si venias, et candida lilia fient,  
 Purpureaeque rosae, et dulce rubens hyacinthus,  
 Tum mihi cum myrto laurus spirabit odores.

NEMESIAN, Eclog. 2.



While in the briny troubled deep,  
Dolphins change their sport for sleep:  
Ghosts and frightful spectres gaunt  
Church-yards dreary footsteps haunt,  
And brush with wither'd arms the dews  
That fall upon the drooping yews.

The popularity of his Scottish poems is a strong proof of their intrinsic merit. With the exception of Ramsay's "Gentle Shepherd," no compositions of a similar description have ever been so universally admired in that part of the island where their beauties can be properly understood and relished. They have always been allowed to rank with the productions of the most celebrated Scottish poets of modern times; and on account of their native beauties, have a just claim to this distinction. They exhibit a sprightfulness of thought, and facility of expression, which have sometimes been equalled, but seldom or never surpassed. The versification is so easy and natural, that it seems to flow spontaneously, and without any kind of effort on the part of the poet. It is always smooth, and upon some occasions highly melodious. Though his subjects are frequently trivial, yet he never becomes flat or insipid: every thing that occurs is lively and entertaining. To those who affirm, that his sentiments are seldom natural, the term nature certainly cannot

be supposed to convey the same signification as it does to the rest of mankind. If nature presides not here, where shall she be found?

His talent for delineating ludicrous scenes has very rarely been exceeded; yet it will be regretted that he has bestowed so much attention on that inferior species of writing; when we peruse his Odes addressed to the Bee, and to the Gowdspink. The latter of these, I consider as the best of all his works. The following passage may be produced, as no unfavourable specimen of his poetical genius.

Sure nature herried mony a tree,  
 For sprains and bonny spats to thee:  
 Nae mair the rainbow can impart  
 Sic glowing ferlies o' her art,  
 Whase pencil wrought its freaks at will  
 On thee, the sey-piece o' her skill.  
 Nae mair thro' straths in simmer dight,  
 We seek the rose to bless our sight;  
 Or bid the bonny wa' flowers sprout  
 On yonder ruin's lofty snout,  
 Thy shining garments far outstrip  
 The cherries upo' Hebe's lip,  
 And fool the tints that nature chose  
 To busk and paint the crimson rose.

Though in these verses, a rigid critic may find something liable to censure, yet there will still be much left to commend.

The *Ode to the Bee* is also a beautiful little poem:

in it, as well as in that addressed to the Gowd-spink, he takes occasion to introduce a train of moral reflections, which are by no means of that hereditary kind which one race of poets hand down to another. The comparison with which it concludes, is entitled to considerable praise.

The poem on *Leith Races* is written with his usual vivacity. The first five stanzas are well calculated to take possession of the fancy. The description of his rencounter with Mirth is picturesque and appropriate: according to his own account, however, he treated the *Laughing Lass* with no great politeness; for after their first meeting, he does not pay the smallest attention to her.

The *Elegy on the Death of Scots Music* is replete with tenderness and simplicity. Like Lovibond in his "Tears of Old May-Day," he introduces an imaginary personage, and bewails her hapless fate in a manner so pathetic, that every one must feel himself moved with sympathy. The personification, however, is not strictly preserved. He exhorts his countrymen to speed to battle,

And fight till Music be restored,  
Whilk now lies dead.

In the former of these verses, music must be regard-

ed as an art, and in the latter, as a nymph or goddess.

To enter upon a particular examination of his various poetical essays, would be an unnecessary task: his beauties are such as cannot fail to present themselves to the mind of every reader.

When we consider the circumstances in which he was placed, it need scarcely appear surprizing, that these beauties are sometimes blended with deformities. He always wrote *currente calamo*, and according to his own confession, could never submit to the labour of correcting his productions. Hence the inaccuracies which so frequently occur.—His promiscuous use of the pronoun *thou*, and its plural *you*, has a very disagreeable effect: there is scarcely a single page of his works free from this blemish. Many other faults might, without much difficulty, be pointed out; but his compositions ought always to be treated with a certain degree of lenity. To apply the rigour of criticism to the unpremeditated effusions of such an author, would be highly absurd.

Carminis incompti tenuem lecture libellum,  
Pone supercilium.

Seria contractis expendo poemata rugis.

Nos Thymelen sequimur.

AUSONIUS.

FINIS.

[Entered in Stationers' Hall.]

